

Allida M. Black

Human Rights Declaration Turns 50

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights turned 50 in 1998. Observances throughout the world focused on remembering the creation and adoption of the Declaration and on its continuing implications. In the United States, symposia, conferences, essay contests, and other activities from the town to the national level marked this anniversary. To commemorate the essential role former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt played in this world event, the Washington National Cathedral in Washington, DC, dedicated a statue of Eleanor Roosevelt in early December. This nearly three-foot icon will stand in the narthex next to similar representations of international human rights leaders, including El Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero. Neil Estern designed both this and the Eleanor Roosevelt statue now housed in the Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides the intellectual framework in which current international human rights issues are debated. Adopted by the United Nations' General Assembly on December 10, 1948, the Declaration has served as a model for more government constitutions worldwide than even the U.S. Declaration of Independence.

Former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt shepherded the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from its inception in 1946 to its adoption by the U.N. General Assembly in 1948. Her appointment to the first U.S. delegation to the United Nations by President Harry Truman recognized her leadership and negotiation prowess, and her importance to the liberal coalition that held the Democratic party after her husband's death. Male members of the delegation appointed her as the U.S. representative to the U.N. Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee, believing its workings would attract little attention. However, the committee quickly became the site of the most heated international issue of the postwar world—refugee resettlement. Roosevelt deftly brokered debates on repatriation, refugee

camp conditions, and ethnic identities. When the committee determined to codify its concerns, members unanimously asked her to chair the process.

Modeled on the Declaration of Independence, the Declaration of the Rights of Man, and the Magna Carta, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reflected Roosevelt's vision of the world. Drafting the document was a politically perilous process involving three years of contentious committee debate. Roosevelt chaired these meetings, often challenging grandstanding critics to make their points quickly or be ruled out of order. From the first sentence of the preamble—"the recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world"—to the last article—"everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible"—the document resonates with Roosevelt's commitment to human rights and citizen participation.

In the midst of the negotiations, Roosevelt wrote a friend that if she convinced even one person of the validity of the Human Rights Declaration, her work would not be in vain. Conceding that the Declaration carried no sanctions for nations violating its provisions, she nevertheless thought it of "outstanding value" because it "put into words some inherent rights" necessary for individual "security and prosperity." By making

Eleanor Roosevelt displays a Spanish version of the Human Rights Declaration. The Declaration was printed in the languages of all signatory countries. Photo courtesy Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.



rights more “tangible,” the Declaration set “before men’s eyes the ideas which they must strive to reach” and gave them standards which “could be invoked before the law.”

When the committee had a unanimously supported document to present to the General Assembly, Roosevelt “mapped out...strategy very carefully,” reviewing every word of the document with each voting member. Her diligent marshalling of support convinced the Soviet Union to abstain from the General Assembly vote rather than be the lone voice in opposition to the adoption of the Declaration.

Calling its creation “a great event in the life of mankind,” Eleanor Roosevelt considered the Universal Declaration of Human Rights her finest achievement. During the last 14 years of her life, she was its most outspoken champion at home and abroad. Roosevelt challenged audiences with the question, “When will our consciences grow so tender that we will act to prevent human misery rather than avenge it?”

“Where Do Human Rights Begin: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” will be on display in the Cathedral Gallery through mid-January. This exhibit of more than 100 photographs and excerpts from Eleanor Roosevelt’s writings introduces visitors to her efforts to promote peace, address issues of concern to refugees, labor, women, and people of color, and to develop comprehensive housing, education, and diplomatic policies.

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For more information, browse
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Eugene Fleming

On the Road to Equality

On July 26, 1948, President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Orders 9980 and 9981, directing the military and federal government to end more than eight decades of segregation in the armed forces. The Pentagon marked the occasion with public events under the title “Executive Orders 9980 and 9981: 50 Years on the Road to Equal Opportunity.”

The National Park Service’s newest inter-agency partnership, Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial, preserves and interprets a significant event in the history of race relations in the U.S. Navy. Administered in partnership with the Navy, Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial honors the memory of black and white munitions handlers and officers who gave their lives and were injured in an explosion on July 17, 1944, recognizes those who served at the magazine, and commemorates the role of the facility as a transshipment point for arms during World War II.

Construction at Port Chicago began in 1942. By 1944, two ships could be loaded with arms simultaneously. African-American Navy ordnance battalions headed by white officers were assigned to munitions loading at Port Chicago. They received cargo handling training, but no special

training in handling highly explosive materials. The Navy had no clear direction for handling munitions, and Coast Guard instructions, published in 1943, were often violated because they were neither safe enough nor fast enough for Port Chicago’s specific environment. Due to tight schedules at the new facility, deviations from these safety standards occurred. Under orders to move faster in order to fill quotas, officers and men experimented with new procedures. Competition developed for the most tonnage loaded in an eight-hour shift.

On the evening of July 17, 1944, the empty SS *Quinault Victory*, less than a week old, prepared for loading on her maiden voyage. The SS *E.A. Bryan* had just returned from her first voyage and was loading across the platform. The holds were being packed with high-explosive and incendiary bombs, depth charges, and ammunition—4,606 tons of munitions in all. There were also 16 rail cars on the pier, containing another 429 tons. 320 cargo handlers, crewmen, and sailors wereworking in the area.

At 10:18 p.m., a hollow ring and the sound of splintering wood sounded from the pier, followed by an explosion that ripped apart the night sky. Witnesses said that a brilliant white flash shot into